Online Grapevine

CompuServe invites subscribers to chat—literally.

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As the nation celebrates its 220th year of independence, "Online Grapevine" toasts a global community that's fighting for the freedom to express itself online. Reveling in the breadth of content available, this month's column tours some noteworthy spots for work and for play.

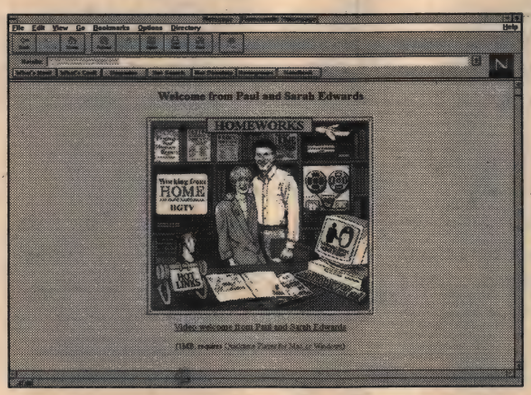
ON THE NET

To be sure, work and play sometimes seem to get crossed. According to a recent press release from *Penthouse,* employees at IBM, Apple, AT&T, NASA, and Hewlett-Packard are among the most frequent visitors to the magazine's Web site (*www.penthousemag.com*), which registers more than 2 million visits each month.

If you're really on the Web to work, you might want to take some advice from Blue, a six-year-old Italian greyhound. Blue offers wisdom for the self-employed at Homeworks (*www.homeworks.com*). The site provides articles, book reviews, and RealAudio interviews of interest for home-office toilers. Homeworks is a bit commercial, but for unfettered commercialism, you can't beat Alka-Seltzer's Feel Better Fast page (*www.alkaseltzer.com*). Yes, friends, a deadpan Web site devoted to the discussion of heartburn.

Speaking of heartburn, the November election is still a long way off, but the Net is abuzz with all things electoral. If you're waxing political, check out the National Political Index (*www.politicalindex.com*), a splendid clearinghouse of all the Net's political items. Here, you'll find 3,500 links, pointing to everything from hourly headlines to political humor to games and simulations. A favorite of ours is President '96 (*www.pres96.com*), a campaign simulation where you become an insider in a make-believe race for the White House. Get news updates, follow the surveys, make decisions, and debate, debate, debate.

Moving from the political to the politically incorrect, which organization would you expect to find at *www.peta.org*—People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals? Nope, this domain is home to PETA's polar opposite, People Eating Tasty Animals. Here you'll find information on meat, leather, biomedical research, and taxidermy, and links to the likes of *Beef Today* magazine and the Deer Hunting FAQ. If you, like the real PETA, are not amused,



The Homeworks site offers those who work at home valuable information in standard and multimedia formats to help them succeed on the job.

you'll probably prefer Paw Prints Post (*www.netreach.net/~dhoffman/pawprints*)—a newsletter "celebrating the animal-human bond" through articles, poetry, and photos.

When there's nothing left to parody, Web users parody themselves. If you're not hip enough for HotWired (*www.hotwired.com*) maybe you're ready for *www.howtired.com.* Or try What Snooz (*www.c3f.com/whasnooz.html*), a heavy-handed satire of Web and pop culture masquerading as a parody of NCSA's What's New page (*www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Software/Mosaic/Docswhats-new.html*).

None of the satiric sites above are appropriate for, or interesting to, children. If you're looking for the more kid-friendly sites as summer wears on, plunk the young ones down at the keyboard and dial up Yahooligans (*www.yahooligans.com*), a service from Yahoo created especially for children. Yahooligans offers loads of links and Yahooligans Rules for Online Safety, good reading for both kids and parents. You and the kids will be equally fascinated by The Internet Webseum of Holography (*www.holoworld.com*), where you can learn how holographs are made and see what they look like (admittedly, this isn't as nifty as seeing them in person.)

It's unlikely that you'll ever see the planet Pluto firsthand, so load the URL *www.stsci.edu/pubinfo/PR/96/09.html* to find the Hubble Space Telescope's photographs of the surface of Pluto, taken in 1994 but just recently made available. According to the site, "viewing surface detail on Pluto is as difficult as trying to read the printing on a golf ball located 33 miles away!"

Elsewhere in the heavens, it was a year ago—on July 23, 1995—that two amateur astronomers discovered a new comet, now named Hale-Bopp. Beginning next month, the comet will be visible with the naked eye. More facts about the comet can be gleaned from a fascinating astronomy site called Izzy's Skylog (*http://darkstar.swsc.k12.ar.us/~kwhite/skylog.html*), which also features the Constellation of the Month. Comets and meteor showers are the focus of Gary Kronk's Web site (*http://medicine.wustl.edu/~kronkg*), which includes comet news, an introduction to meteor showers, a glossary, and info about flying space garbage.

AMERICA ONLINE

You've got to be curious about anything bearing the subtitle "It doesn't suck." Geared toward the twentysomething crowd, the HUB (keyword: *Hub*) is a humorous digital testament to short attention spans and fervent opinions.

Developed by AOL and New Line Television, the HUB is an interesting if unorganized array of "channels" of news and opinion. There's The Hot Button, which AOL describes as up-to-the-minute, unfiltered data on the hot topic of the moment; Monolith, which celebrates digital lifestyles and culture; and Get a Life, a guide to the wide world beyond the computer screen. While you're there, be sure to sift through "Bill Gates' e-mail cache." The HUB is certainly worth checking out, but only if your life needs no structure.

Love@AOL is the none-too-creative name (and keyword) for AOL's forum for the lovelorn. Laced with smarmy stock photos of attractive lovers, it offers message boards and live chat dedicated to the search for the perfect companion. If a digital matchmaker is what you need, you can create a "love profile" (no kidding) to describe yourself and search through others' profiles. Perhaps this columnist would be making more derisive comments if his own mother hadn't found her true love on AOL.

If you succeed in making friends, you'll be able to keep track of them using AOL's Buddy Lists feature: After you enter the screen names of your comrades, Buddy alerts you when they log in or log off. If you're wary about being tracked, fear not: Buddy Lists include privacy features that can block others from keeping tabs on you. Buddy Lists are only available for Windows users (sigh), but Mac users can get to the privacy features.

Lest you think AOL offers only

Shopper Online

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We've been making some changes to *Computer Shopper*'s online editions. Our recently redesigned Web site (*http://www.cshopper.com*) will give you quicker access to the information, downloads, and shopping tools you need most. We're also making your purchasing decisions easier by providing more photos of reviewed products and including up-to-date shopping tools to help you navigate the direct channel. Don't pick up the phone without checking the most recent version of the 10 Commandments to Buying Direct and the revised Guide to Buying Direct.

This month, we also welcome Heather Hoffman, our new ZD Net/CompuServe editor and organizer of *Shopper*'s monthly events in the Executives Online Forum (*GO ZNT:EXEC*). She kicks off her *Shopper* career with an event on social virtual reality, inspired by Susan Borden's "Virtually Sociable" feature in this month's Tech Section (see p. 572). The article and event examine a new virtual-reality Internet language called Scaleable Platform for Interactive Environments (SPLINE), which lets users interact with their environment and with one another in online settings.

SPLINE can be used to create online multimedia environments where participants may personalize their avatars, or online personalities, and interact within a space of their own design. The concept grew out of the Internet's multiuser dungeons (MUDs), applications that allow multiple players to enter the same game database. SPLINE advances this gaming technology to permit characters who look like clerics and warriors to interact in a virtual dungeon, where the objects move and the characters speak to one another.

The SPLINE language was developed by Mitsubishi Electric Research Laboratories, and is being used by other firms including Fujitsu Technologies and Xerox PARC to create online locations for business as well as pleasure. As an example of the former, architects could use the environment-modeling language to walk their clients through a virtual version of a building, exploring blueprints in 3-D.

Join us in July on ZD Net/CompuServe to find out about this next wave of virtual-reality technology. ▼

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Microsoft Network: If you are a member of MSN, access *ComputerShopper* from the main screen. (Choose Go To from the Edit pull-down menu.) You can also get to us by clicking on Categories/Computers, Software/Computer News, and Publications/Computer Shopper. To join MSN, you must have Windows 95.

COMPUTER SHOPPER ONLINE

fun and games, check out Your Business, a collection of features dedicated to the small-business community. The area provides a wide array of content geared toward helping small business owners manage and grow their enterprises. You'll find several business magazines (including *Inc.*, with an impressive 10-year back-issue archive), and advice on business strategies, government resources, and franchising (keyword: *Your Business*).

COMPUSERVE AND WOW

CIS has voice mail! WinCIM users now can send and receive voice messages, but don't worry, no one will ask you to press 1 to leave a message. Sending audio messages to fellow subscribers doesn't cost any more than regular CIS e-mail, but the additional software used to send the digital audio files will set you back $29.95. The playback software is free, so you won't have to shell out 30 clams just to listen (*GO CIS: VOICEMAIL*).

CompuServe is adding audio messaging and real-time Internet Phone-based audio chat capabilities to some of its online services.

Apparently, Digital audio is paramount on CompuServe's mind: The service will soon make VocalTec's Internet Phone software available to its customers, allowing subscribers to have real-time voice conversations over the Internet. Internet Phone will be an integrated part of the SpryNet Internet service, and an option for CompuServe users.

Another recent partnership, between CompuServe and Surefind Information, will provide CIS subscribers a simple way to back up their hard drive data without owning a storage device. Using the Surefind service (*GO CIS: BACKUP*), you can back up your files via modem to WORM-based "storage vaults." The data is encrypted and password-protected, and it's available for immediate recovery anytime.

You've certainly heard the hype about CompuServe's family-friendly spinoff service Wow. One reason Wow has created a stir is its pricing—at $17.95 per month for unlimited access, it's $2 a month cheaper than AT&T's WorldNet, and for heavy users, a whole lot less expensive than the other online services. My intuition tells me, however, that we shouldn't get used to all-you-can-eat access from Wow or any other service. When Prodigy was launched more than 12 years ago, it cost less than $20 for unlimited access. Loving nothing more than a free lunch, users took the offer literally, and Prodigy was crushed under the load. I bet CompuServe will rethink Wow's pricing plan sooner or later.

PRODIGY

The opening ceremonies of the 1996 Olympic games will be held on July 19. Folks who want to talk about the quadrennial competition can do so in Prodigy's Olympics bulletin board (jumpword: *OLYMPICS BB*).

But you may want to consider your words carefully before you post. Prodigy has added a new twist to its bulletin boards: a powerful search function capable of tracing all information posted to any of the service's boards. Users are able to peruse the more than 17 million missives posted to Prodigy's bulletin boards in the past year, filtering by sender, receiver, or keywords.

Although you might think AOL and CompuServe are kicking themselves for not thinking of it first, they may be sharing a sigh of relief that they didn't: Privacy-rights advocates are worried about the search function's potential misuse as a tool of Big Brother. Such archives allow anyone, from prospective employers to nosy neighbors, to develop profiles of individuals based on their aggregate postings. Months ago, Internet users raised similar concerns over DejaNews (*http://www.dejanews.com*), a free Internet tool for searching Usenet newsgroups. It comes down to this: Anything you type could go down in the annals of history, so think twice before you turn up the flames. ▼